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ABSTRACT

Noting that being illiterate in this country precludes full participation in society, this paper addresses the issue of whether or not American society is truly literate. The first section of the paper offers a historical review of commentary on literacy and education to show that there has never truly been "a golden age of literacy," but rather that the public has always been concerned about the state of the English language and the ability of schools to educate individuals to use that language. It concludes that the public tends to see "literacy" as a static and finite product, and that because of this narrow definition, schools will never completely satisfy demands for basic education. The second section of the paper looks at the social and cultural context of literacy, concluding that literacy is not a set of measurable, static skills, but a living and changing entity that defines culture and is created by it. The third section of the paper examines literacy in the United States today, reviewing the following recent publications that have had an impact on the nation's view of literacy and schooling: (1) "A Nation at Risk"; (2) "Books in Our Future"; (3) "Becoming a Nation of Readers"; (4) The Reading Report Card"; (5) "The Report on Writing"; (6) "What Works"; and (7) "Literacy: Profiles of America's Young Adults." The final section of the paper offers 10 suggestions for reform to address the issue of illiteracy, including establishing a coherent and workable philosophy of education, establishing reasonable goals for education and schools, understanding and preparing for future demographics, working to make schools part of the community, and enabling parents to become part of the schooling process. (FL)

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THE QUEST FOR LITERACY

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To be illiterate in the United States today is to be denied the possibility of full participation in our society. This reality has sparked a concern at the community, state and federal level and has led to the demand for educational reform. Much of the concern centers on the question of literacy. Are we a literate society? If not, why not?

Literacy generally is associated with the ability to read and write. This truncated definition will be expanded as the subject is addressed in four stages:

1. the search for "the golden age of literacy";
2. the social/cultural context of literacy;
3. literacy today;and,
4. suggestions for reform.

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The Golden Age of Literacy

If one reads newspapers ranging from the local small town paper to the New York Times; if one reads magazines ranging from Time and Newsweek to the various professional journals in education; if one listens to the radio and television, then it becomes evident that the public is convinced that schools are doing a poor job of developing the abilities of students to read

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and write. There is a myth that we once had a golden age of literacy and that somehow we have lost it and must "get back to the basics" to regain this level of competency.

It is not uncommon to hear a parent lament that "when I was in school everyone learned to read and write". Time has provided a rosy aura for those "good old days" and a perusal of the literature negates this hopeful belief.

In 1954, William S. Gray and William Iverson reported,

> One of the facts which stands out clearly in recent criticisms of the schools is that parents and the public in general expect schools to develop in the pupils a high level of efficiency in reading. They show also that much dissatisfaction exists with recent products of the school so far as reading ability is concerned. To add apparent strength to their criticisms, parents often state that reading is not so well taught today as it was when they went to school. (1954, p.108)

In the 1940s the declaration was made, "It's nothing new; it's been going on for years. It is common knowledge among educators that at least one third of our school children lag behind their age and grade in reading, all the way through school. Thousands emerge from high school totally unable to read and comprehend so much as the daily paper." (Porter, 1946, p.22)

A survey published in 1922 with the title "Is Our Education a National Menace?" concluded, "... again, as before the war, we are being told that our education is failing in its true tests: it is

not producing scholars; it is not assuring competent and skilled workers; it is not fitting anybody for anything." (J.K.H., 1922, p. 252)

The National Society for the Study of Education has published two volumes of a yearbook each year since 1901. These yearbooks explore the fundamental questions of education as they attain importance. In the fifth yearbook it was indicated that "the weakness of America today is the inability and, therefore, the disinclination of the mass of the people to read a serious and logical exposition of any subject." (Brown, 1906, p.26)

Surely the 19th century was a bastion for literacy. But Horace Mann wrote in 1838 that "more than 11/12 ths of all the children in the reading classes in our schools do not understand the meanings of the words they read."

And, in 1710 Jonathan Swift announced in Tattler that the degeneration of the English language was quickly proceeding and only drastic measures could prevent it from becoming unintelligible inside twenty years.

This brief historical survey suggests that there always has been and always will be a concern about the state of the English language and the ability of the populace to use that language in oral and written form. It suggests that schools will never completely satisfy the public as to their success in providing a basic education. Further, it suggests that literacy is considered to be a finite and static "product," and that surely the schools could provide such a product after all these years of practice.

The Social/Cultural Context

Learning from books has become a universal experience of growing up in the moderen Western world. Historian Elizabeth Eisenstein (1979, p. 432) designated this gradually wrought shift from the oral word to the written word as possibly the most fundamental social revolution in European history. Some believe that literacy is not just a delivery system but that there is a linguistic, psychological, social and cultural content to literacy (Shuy, 1981).

When we condider the concept of literacy, it is important to realize that of the tens of thousands of languages spoken during human history only 106 have ever been committed to writing to a degree to produce literature and most have never been written at all. Of the 3,000 languages spoken that exist today, only 78 have a literature. It is the production of literature, the use of the written word to create ideas as well as record actions, that delineates a literate society.

Walter Ong (1982, p. 78) has declared that "more than any other single invention, writing has transformed human culture." Literacy opens possibilities to the word and to human existance unimaginable without writing. It is this understanding of the power of literacy and the deepseated belief in democracy in the United States that drives our quest for universal literacy.

Far from being a finite and static product, literacy is a changing and fluid concept. The demand for literacy is an altering demand; one that is dependent on the needs of society. The context

of literacy in the United States has modified from that of elitism at the beginning of the century to one of universal literacy in the 1980s (Harste and Mikulecky, 1984). Part of this change is a reflection of the American character; we want everything to increase and improve.

David Potter (1954) believed Americans are driven by the belief that one should never rest content in the existing station. Society demands advancement as proof of merit. We see this in almost every aspect of business and education. Teachers have career ladders they must climb, college teachers move from assistant to associate to full professor, workers start at the bottom and "work their way up." Margaret Mead (1942) reflected that American life is geared to success rather than status. We measure worth by the distance we progress from the point of departure; parents expect their children to go beyond them. We are facing an unsettling shift in cultural expectations in relation to this belief. For the first time in American history, children are being faced with the possibility of not being able to surpass their parents in what they might attain and possess. Recently, Time magazine carried an article on the disappearance of the American middle class. It will be interesting to see what effect this reality has on the demands of literacy. Karen Horney (1937) wrote of the cult of success. The attainment of a competitive goal is more important than attainment of personal satisfaction. The fundamental stress for Americans is the strong emphasis on the principle of individual competition. Unfortunately, there is no finish line in the race.

The aspect of competition is exemplified in the present concern for literacy. Parents, teachers, communities and states vie with each other to prove they have better schools and better educated children and the only measurable statistic they can employ is the use of test scores. Children are tested constantly and curricula are now being designed to see that children do well on tests. We are also beginning to test teachers to see that they will be able to teach children to pass tests. If this seems circular, it is. It is also assuming something very dangerous--that tests can measure literacy. It is my contention and that of many others, that literacy is not merely the ability to decode words and the employment of appropriate grammar and spelling in the construction of written text. Literacy implies a broad range of language abilities that includes essential thinking skills.

Language and literacy must be studied as a concomitant of other forms of communication and within a sociocultural context. Halliday (1975,1978) equated text to meaning and declared that the act of meaning is a social act. Furthermore, "a child, in the act of learning language, is also learning the culture through language" (1975, p. 66). Vygotsky (1962) studied the relationship between thought and language and concluded, "thought is not merely experienced in words: it comes into existance through them" (p. 125). Words that are committed to paper, that give the reader time to recreate and to respond, are indeed fraught with power.

The technological development of the 20th century within the United States has been one of the major social forces on the demand for universal literacy. John Naisbett (1982) considered the

move from an industrial society to an information society to be the first and most important megatrend operating today. Alvin Toffler (1980) refered to the shift to a Third Wave social memory as one of the most important movements of the future. We can not allow this opportunity for change to become a search for an illusory past or condone the creation of a static, easily measurable set of skills defined as literacy. Language is a living and changing entity; one that defines the culture and that is created by the culture.

Literacy Today

What is literacy today? I began with the most restricted definition of literacy as being the ability to read and write. If we use this minimum definition, then almost all Americans are literate. If, however, we use the definition of functional literacy that was constructed by William S. Gray (1956) we are more likely to get a perspective of literacy in the social/cultural milieu of the United States today. He stated that a person is functionally literate when he or she has acquired the knowledge and skills in reading and writing which enable him or her to engage effectively in all those activities in which literacy is assumed in the culture or group. By this definition, a larger percentage of the populace is functionally illiterate.

Let us look at several documents that have had an impact on the nation's view of literacy and schooling. in presenting these documents in chronological order, the later data certainly look

much better that the earlier data. Several pertinent statements from each document have been selected to provide a flavor for the whole.

1. A Nation at Risk. This document was published in 1983 and stirred a firestorm of criticism. It was the impetus for many commissions and the movement toward "excellence." Several of the indicators of risk as reported in this document are summarized below.

A. Some 23 million American adults are fuctionally illiterate by the simplest tests of everyday reading, writing, and comprehension.

The latest data released by the census bureau in April, 1986 provide a better perspective of this figure. A basic literacy test was given to 3,400 Americans age 20 and over. Thirteen percent failed, which translates to 17-21 million U. S. illiterates. Facts about these illiterates include that 1) 9% of all native English-speaking adults are illiterate, 2) 48% of non-native English-speaking adults are illiterate in English, 3) 14% of these are literate in their native language, 4) 82% of these who are considered to be illiterate were born outside the United States, and, 5) 42% live in neighborhoods where English is not spoken. I truly believe that teachers cannot be held responsible for all of these illiterates as being products of poor schooling.

B. About 13 percent of all 17-year-olds in the United States can be considered functionally illiterate.

Functional illiteracy among minority youth may run as high as 40 percent.

It is estimated that of these 17-year-olds, 13% of Anglos, 56% of Hispanics and 47% of Blacks are functionally illiterate. Additional information does help us to put this in perspective. Sixty-one million of our populace over the age og 16 have less than a high school education. If ourstudents do not stay in school we cannot teach them. In the mid-19th century, less than one in 10 was literate,; by 1975 seven in 10 ware literate; and by 1986, nine in 10 are considered literate. This indicates that schools are doing a fine job. There is a need to do even better.

C. Average achievement of high school students on most standardized tests is now lower than 26 years ago when Sputnik was launched.

Research simply does not support this assertion from A Nation at Risk. Roger Farr and others have conducted extensive research that indicates that in observing changes in children's reading achievement between 1946 and 1976 there is no question that on the average, students read better today than in the past. Further, statewide testing of California's second and third graders shows a steady improvement of scores from 1976 into the 1980s. The National Assessment of Educational Progress results, which will be reported later, will also deny this indicator of risk.

D. Over half the population of gifted students do not match their tested ability with comparable achievement in school.

E. The College Board's Scholastic Aptitude Tests (SAT) demonstrate a virtually unbroken decline from 1963 to 1980.

However, beginning in 1981 the test scores began to rise again. It is arguable that the SAT really is not a good measure of literacy. It is given only to high school juniors and seniors considering college, and the decline may well be due to the widening pool of students who are taking the test. We are encouraging a higher proportion of high school students to go to college, so the SAT scores may have declined because the pool of examinees has widened.

2. Books in Our Future. Produced in 1984 by a Joint Committee on the Library, it is based on a survey of reading habits by the Book Industry Study Group in 1983. It shows that 50% of the American public can be called book readers, that is, they have read one or more books in the last 6 months. Many school libraries have been neglectd or abolished and public libraries receive low priority when it comes to funding, with children's collections receiving the lowest priority of all. How can we expect children to become readers if we do not provide materials for them to read? The study also notes that book reading is greatest among children

whose parents or guardians value reading, both for pleasure and as a key to achievement. Children who read a good deal were regularly read to.

3. Becoming a Nation of Readers. This was published in 1985 and suggests that how Americans of today compare with those in the past is less urgent than the question of whether current generations will be literate enough to meet the demands of the future. What was a satisfactory level of literacy in the recent past probably will be marginal in the year 2000. There are 17 recommendations in this document which I will distill into five.

A. Parents should read to their children and support their continued growth as readers.

B. Instruction should include both phonics and comprehension. Decoding is useful for some, comprehension is necessary for all.

C. Children should spend less time completing workbooks and skill sheets and more time in independent reading. If we want children to become readers, they must **read**; they must not fill in the blanks.

D. Children should spend more time writing.

E. Schools should cultivate an ethos that supports reading--programs such as the sustained silent reading programs where everyone at a specified time picks up a book and reads. In addition, schools should maintain well-stocked and managed libraries.

4. The Reading Report Card. This document was published in 1985 and reports trends in reading over four national assessments from 1971 to 1984. It was conducted by the National Assessment of Educational Progress and data came from 251,00 students. Five levels of proficiency were designated on a scale from 0 to 500.

This study notes many achievements. Students at ages 9, 13, and 17 were better readers in 1984 than students at the same ages were in 1971. Nine and 13 year olds improved through the 1970s and 17 year olds improved between 1980 and 1984. Black and Hispanic students, as well as those living in disadvantaged communities, have made sizeable improvements. Virtually all 13 and 17 year old students can read **basic** material, and 84 percent of the 17 year olds still in school have acquired the **intermediate** reading skills and strategies necessary to understand specific and general information in relatively lengthy reading passages.

However, there are needs for improvement. Nine and 13 year olds did not show improvements between 1980 and 1984, halting the upward trend in performance of these ages during the 1970s. Though minorities and the disadvantaged have improved, the average reading proficiency of these students is still quite low. Six percent of 9 year olds in 1984 could not do rudimentary reading exercises and are in danger of failing. Forty percent of 13 year olds and 16% of 17 year olds attending high school have not acquired intermediate reading skills and strategies. Few students, only 5%, even at age 17, have advanced reading skills and strategies.

The document also reports that the influence of home environment is apparent from the relationship between reading proficiency and both available reading material in the home and level of parental education. At all three ages, students from homes with an abundance of reading materials are substantially better readers than those who have few materials available. At all three ages, students whose parents have a post-high-school education read substantially better than those whose parents have not graduated from high school. Six or more hours of TV viewing per day is consistently and strongly related to lower reading proficiency for all three age groups. In 1984, 27% of nine year olds reported watching more than 6 hours of TV per day, up from 18% four years earlier.

5. Report on Writing. This document has been reported in the press but is not yet available to the public. The survey reflects writing achievement of 95,000 students from 1974 through 1984.The majority of American students cannot write prose that successfully informs, persuades, or entertains and are writing no better than their peers did a decade ago. The proportion of competent writers remains distressingly small.

Sixty-two percent of 17 year olds, 81% of 13 year olds,and 97% of 9 year olds could not write an adequate piece of informative prose; 76% of 17 year olds, 83% of 13 year olds, and 95% of 9 year olds could not write an adequate imaginative description; 80% of 17 year olds, 90% of 13 year olds, and 66% of 9 year olds could not write an adequate persuasive letter. If we

have students spend time filling in worksheets and not writing connected text, they will not learn to write.

6. What Works. This 1986 publication reports research about teaching and learning and is presented in a very simplified form for the lay reader. The sections are the home, the classroom, and the school.

7. Literacy: Profiles of America's Young Adults. THis document was published in 1986 and inventories the literacy skills of America's young adults from age 21 to age 25. By yesterday's standards the news is good. Ninety-five percent can read and understand the printed word. By tomorrow's needs, however, there is cause for concern. Only a small percent can understand complex material. Illiteracy is not the problem; literacy is. Most can accomplish routine reading tasks; few can accomplish moderate or relatively complex tasks. Minorities and dropouts scored lowest. We must develop and apply appropriate intervention strategies when we consider the demographics that will be reported next. There is also a question as to whether we must teach better or change the curriculum. Literacy is a life-long pursuit and one that we must work very hard to continue.

It now becomes necessary to consider some startling demographics on America's population now and for the future that have been compiled by Harold Hodgkinson. In September of 1986, more than 3.6 million children began formal schooling in the United States. One out of 4 is from a family who lives in

poverty; 14% are the children of teenage mothers; 15% are physically or mentally handicapped; 15% are immigrants who speak no English; 14% are children of unmarried parents; 40% will live in a broken home before they are 18; 10% have poorly educated or illiterate parents; between 25% and 33% are latchkey children; 25% or more will not finish school.

Our ethnic and racial diversity is increasing rapidly. Immigration, legal and illegal, is high, and the white fertility rate is at an all-time low. As a result, demographers say, by shortly after the year 2000 one out of three children will be nonwhite. The traditional family-- a mother, a father and two children-- is vanishing. Single parent families, mostly headed by women, are becoming commonplace, and 20 million Americans live alone. Every day in America 40 teenagers give birth to their third child.

To consider further the statictic that one in four American children lives in poverty calls to our attention that they are the largest group of impoverished Americans. More than half the children living in households headed by single women are poor. A black child is about three times as likely as a white child to be born into poverty; a Hispanic child is more than twice as likely to be poor. When we consider that minority children are more likely to be at risk and the proven impact the family has on literacy, the demographics are frightening.

Suggestions for Reform

Illiteracy is a form of servitude, and is repugnant in our democratic society. We must do all in our power to prevent it. My suggestions are as follows.

1. We must establish a philosophy of education that is coherent and workable. We must stop careening from fad to fad, from minimum competencies to the search for excellence. The school districts that I have observed which have been successful are those that establish a philosophy, that know what their goals are and that provide time for a new idea to work, not leap into whatever the new fad is.

2. We must establish reasonable goals for education and for schools. It is unfair to expect the schools to solve all of the social problems of our society. If this is expected, then an extended social program must be developed, with the appropriate facilities and professionals. We must cease adding expectations to the program of schooling and not providing the means for accomplishing them.

3. We must understand the demographics of the future and prepare for them. Hoping these demographics will not come to fruition will not work; they will. At least 30% of the children in public schools in 2000 will be non-white. Many of these will be

non-English speaking. We must be actors, not reactors. We must prepare for the future.

4. We must work to make the school part of the community. We are in a fortunate time, when business at large is concerned about the state of literacy. Many businesses are reaching out to the schools to say, "What can we do that will help?" We must reach back to the business community and form a partnership.

5. We must enable parents to become part of the schooling process. Many parents had unfortunate school experiences themselves. They are afraid of the schools; they do not have any good feelings about the schools. We must reach out to these parents. It is not the parent's responsibility to select curricula but parents must be made partners in all ways that are possible.

6. We must go beyond the basics and minimum competencies, particularly in reading and writing. All the data reported frome these seven studies support this recommendation.

7. We must support both school and public libraries. At a recent meeting of the American Association of School Librarians, Secretary of Education William Bennett was asked if it would be possible in 1987 to provide two books per child in the schools. This group was told that this would be impossible. The fact that the average per pupil expenditure for books for school libraries is $4.58 is a disgrace. Let us consider some values. This is the

equivalent of three packs of cigarettes or six candy bars from a vending machine. Are not our children worth more?

8. We must control television viewing by our children. The magazine with the greatest weekly circulation in the United States is TV Guide, with a circulation of 17,000,000. Talk about the gross national product! Do not meekly say that children decide what television they are going to watch. Parents are in control.

9. We must conduct appropriate research that will lead to educational change. There is a need for research that explores the relationship anomg language and thought and culture, as well as research that explores appropriate ways to develop language abilities within educational settings. We must abandon quick and easy studies that have little application to the world at large.

10. We must be leaders, not followers. In education we often wait to be told what is going to happen to us. I believe we must go to state legislatures and inform them about what is needed. So often we believe that one person cannot make a difference. One person can make a difference and each of the "ones" of us together can make a large difference.

George S. Counts (1932) lamented that, "We are moved by no great faiths; we are touched by no great passions." I deny this. As one who is proud to call myself a teacher, I have a passion for learning and an equal passion for sharing what I have learned. I

invite you to join me in this grand and glorious quest for literacy.

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